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FATHY EL-EBIARY

A JOURNEY OUTSIDE THE GAME

NOVEL
in
Short Stories

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A JOURNEY OUTSIDE THE GAME

NOVEL

in short stories

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"This new, pioneering experiment ... is a new conquest for the Arabic novel, as well as for Arabic fiction. Always in search of a new form, a new style and structure, Fathy El-Ebiary has achieved his revolutionary object. "

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"This novel may constitute a totally new approach to the writing of fiction".

MOHAMED MOSTAFA HADDARAH

A JOURNEY OUTSIDE THE GAME

ON THE BORDERLINE OF THE GAME

How nice for one to take a trip around the world one lives in; to see people, countries, the beauty of nature, to explore advanced and backward societies ; to inhale the perfume of different women, blonde, black, brown, yellow and red, all over the world, and to return from one's roaming with one's heart filled with a great love for the creator of love, of beauty, of the land, the mountains and the sea.

But what happens when, while caught up in the whirlpools of ups living and of people every moment of every hour of every day, you suddenly fall off the edge, into the abyss of silense outside the daily game played by all of us ? The game of life with its delightful madness, the madness of one spinning on the wheel of living, breathless, turning and turning, believing that he is cover-

ing great distances and that he is the tyrant of all tyrants : the creator of matter and the controller of all just as we used to play at life, when we were children, before it played with us. What happens when you find yourself lying down, having fallen, out of breath from long running after a mirage, outside the border of the game.

Only then does one feel, lying outside the game, as though he is looking at a strange game that has nothing to do with him, or may be watching a film projected from Mars. Those spinning on its wheel seem like in Natures cardboard toys, while by a secret power you are mounting higher and higher. After your sudden drop from exhaustion, you find yourself upon a missile flying toward the era of silence and stillness. The missile, in my case, is the sick bed which bore me flying out of the game for ninety days. Lying on my back for so long made me see everything yellow. I saw every thing around me in a different colour and my imagination flashed me back and forth, reliving past events both far and near. I metamorphosed into a new person, struggling, caught between falling into the darkness of non-existence or holding on to the rim of the turning wheel of life. I held on, resisting the fall into the darkness of non-existence, returning to the tumult and noise of the game of rabbits and animals in this endless universe.

I clung to the secret aura which surrounded me, though, and found outside the noise and whirling of the game, seeing clearly the person who was me after turn-

ing away from him. For ninety days I watched the game from the outside. What did I see ? What did I hear ? How did my imagination and my dreams and the long short days take me flying to that radiant world far, far from the monotonous murderous spinning to watch what went on inside the game while I was on a trip outside it ?

PERSISTENCE

"Don't move or leave your bed at all. You must have complete rest; otherwise, you'll be putting your life at risk".

The doctor was saying this, having looked through the result of the tests, examined me, measured the blood pressure, and peered into my eyes while I lay there, drained.

After many depressing thoughts had gone through my mind I finally asked, "can't I go to Alexandria for some more tests ?"

— 'It's quite possible to do that in Cairo."

— "Didn't you say that my condition was critical ?"

— "That depends on you."

— "And on the will of God, and so if anything happens I would rather be in Alexandria."

— "This is madness. Keep still !"

— "But I'm quite capable of moving."

— "Your liver is riddled with hepatitis, the yellow plague."

— "That's all right : yellow, green or blue, the important thing is to move before it turns black."

Osama, the doctor, summoned my wife to ask her if these fits of insanity attacked me regularly. How could I even think of moving with my liver like a rotten egg about to burst ? But a secret stubbornness deep inside me had never believed in surrender, except once before when I had undergone a number of successive operations.

I am used to struggle. How can it all end with me lying here like a juggled rabbit away from Alexandria I jumped out of bed and in a few minutes I was dressed.

I glanced at my face in the mirror; it seemed to have turned yellow. I asked my young son to get dressed and drive me to the Pullman bus station.

My wife's screams were drowned in her copious tears and she stood there like a waxwork. at a loss, as I slowly went out through the apartment door. The doctor said jokingly : "You people of the sea are always stubborn."

— "It is the love of life, doctor. The important thing is to get to Alexandria before anything happens."

— "What you are doing is sheer madness. I'll call the rescue squad and have them stop you from travelling."

I looked at my son, not yet sixteen, driving my car while I sat huddled in my coat suffering from the pain in my liver and from other things I could not recognize and a question always before my eyes: Will I see this son of mine again or is this the last time ? He was frightened and his hands were shaking on the steering wheel.

"Look where you're going and drive slowly, the way you used to when I was teaching you to drive."

I reached the Pullman station. The bus was there, but it was not yet time to leave. I told my son to take the car back to the garage near the station and come back to reassure me that he had done so safely. In ten minutes he returned. I hugged and kissed him realizing that he had become a man whom I could depend on. But I saw his tears flowing.

"Don't worry, what the doctor said isn't as serious as it seems. I shall be back soon. I'm quite all right: all I need is rest, just rest."

It was time for the bus to start. My son gave me a kiss from the heart and out of my liver I produced the semblance of a smile. I shrank into my coat and the bus was on its way, crawling like a tortoise through the streets of Cairo, going through Ramses Street on its way to Tahrir Square. Once in a while I opened my eyes to cast a 'last' look on this world; feeling like one just

about to leave it. I recited verses of the Holy Koran, that God might let me reach Alexandria before anything happened to me.

My mind whirled with fragments of questions, half-finished answers. Is this the way the game ends ? What is it, this game we all play, even me : racing madly in a circle that never ends ? What for ? Money, children, luxury, hope ; are all bubbles which burst at the slightest pinprick. Then all the struggle ends. What kind of end is that ? One leaves this game on a stretcher, or broken ; in bits and pieces scattered about, or perhaps as a skeleton; the possibilities are endless, and horrible.

Suddenly the bus stopped near the railroad station. There had been an accident a few minutes ago and now traffic was at a standstill. Finally the bus passed slowly beside the scene of the crash and I saw a large crowd of ants surrounding the two cars. One of the ants was soaked in his own blood and carried by a number of other ants. Slowly the bus moved, an anonymous guest at an unknown funeral, then it quickened its pace, flying over Ramses bridge like a rocket as though nothing had happened, and the rest of the cars around us also hurried in panic. On goes the whirlpool, no stopping, no rest. Everything is rushing by, spinning in the whirlpool, while I sit here curled up in my seat, feeling the pain squeezing me and tightening its grip on my liver. I fought it, hoping to reach Alexandria and dive into its strengthening sea of resistance.

I saw the organization where I have been struggling

for twenty years, wrestling futilely, struggling, along with all the other exhausted combatants, with love, hate, evil, fame, glory, power : futility. All my memories were faded and tinged with yellow now, the yellowness of decay, of death : perhaps, the hue of a giant, invisible vampire, living on the blood of hundreds like me deluded by the craving for life and fame.

Again I curled up tighter into my coat next to the window of the speeding car. My eyelids drooped as the pain in my liver increased. I cupped it in my hand, praying to the God of love, murmuring over and over : "O Allah, I would not presume to ask you to change what you have ordained: only to lighten the blow."

In Tahrir Square the bus stopped for the rest of the passengers to get on. A girl came and made as if to sit in the empty seat beside me, but instead she approached me saying, "You've taken my seat."

I did not answer, absorbed in my pain.

— "Mister, you're sitting in my seat!"

If I were in good health this girl would not dare open her mouth. This blind girl cannot see how crushed I am. Healthy people have no compassion for the weak. Decades passed in an instant as I felt myself grow old. People don't realize what the years have done to me. I came back to reality with the girl shouting, "You are sitting in my place !"

I summoned some of my strength and fixed her with a piercing stare. "Just sit here."

The driver, annoyed with her, yelled : "That's your seat ! The gentleman is sitting in his own place. Look at the number on your ticket ! If you don't like it, go and sit at the back."

The girl dropped roughly into her seat after the driver's rebuke. My liver shook. An agonizing pain stabbed at me and I wanted to slap and strangle her but I felt my strength seeping away. I pulled myself together, fighting the pain until I got to Alexandria. Would I reach it or not ?

The car moved on, crossing Kasr el Nil bridge. The Nile beaneath us looked yellow. How often had I stood gazing at it, contemplating it, wondering at its perseverance, undertaking its long journey from Lake Victoria to Cairo and even farther on ; now it looks like a stagnant pond, yellow in spite of the life in it.

The bus wormed its way through a sea of cars, traffic signals, buildings and huge hotels until it reached Al Haram Street on its way to the highway road. Every now and then I opened my eyes to cast a look on this world. At a distance I saw the pyramids, eternal symbol of the immortality of man's ambition : man, who has always insisted on translating what lies in the folds of his brain and the power which God implanted in his liver and heart into what we call the miracle of civilization.

Before I closed my eyes in agony again I sensed a movement and saw the girl beside me smile, saying, "I'm sorry. I hope you get well soon. I didn't know."

— "Thank you."

Again I drowned myself in my coat and my sight rested on the vast desert with its yellow sands and the sky which was yellow too and a feeling of calm stole over me. I wished the car would turn into a rocket and take me to Alexandria in a flash before anything happened to me so that I would not be any trouble and so that I could be near the sea, my last resting-place. Pain took me on a silent trip and the images in my thoughts were so tangled that I recognized nothing but the echo of those words I had heard from the doctor : "What you are doing is sheer madness." This is more than madness, the sound of those words drowned out by the noise of the car moving at full speed I drowning in a sea of pain.

The car reached Alexandria. I smelt the sea and saw the waves of the great sea, the minaret of Sidi Aboul Abbas, the fortress of Quaitbay and the large fishing boats on the eastern harbour. The bus stopped at Saad Zaghlool Square where some of my relatives and friends were waiting for me. An immense wave of relief flooded over me for I had arrived. I tried to get up but a stabbing pain shewered me to my seat. The passengers alighted, one after the other while I remained tied to my seat with ropes of pain.

BECAUSE SHE SAW HER SON

Never could the mother have imagined that this would happen to her only son.

He lay on the bed before her fighting his pain in silence, some of his colleagues and friends with him. He had just arrived from his journey suffering from an acute inflammation of the liver. Some analysts had come and taken blood samples and urine specimens to see how badly his liver was afflicted : his doctor had ordered him not to move at all for two months.

The mother moved about the house in a trance praying incessantly for his recovery. She was unaware of her own fatigue and walked to and fro carrying drinks, tea and coffee to her son's friends who sat with them, trying to lighten this sudden shock.

The mother sat on the prayer-mat to perform the night prayer. Her tears mingled with her praise and prayers. Her thoughts went back to an incident she would never forget, which had occurred a week before her son's last trip.

She had been in the bathroom having a bath, when the gas had started seeping out of the heater's pipe mixing with the steam in the closed room. She felt herself growing weaker, alone in the house, swaying naked in the bathroom, suffocating. She tried to scream but her voice was choked back by the steam and the seeping gas. When she heard the door bell ringing over and over again she grew more alert and tried with all her might to put on her clothes and not fall down. By a sheer effort of will she finally managed to open the bathroom door and tried to answer the door, hoping that the caller would prevent her from collapsing. The ringing of the bell droned in her ears as she moved slowly, leaning on the wall as she went. At last she opened the outer door and found her son outside, annoyed because it had taken her so long to open the door.

He was filled with alarm when he saw her, hearing her croaking : "I could have suffocated !" He supported her, put her to bed, covered her with a thick quilt and opened the balcony and the window to let in the fresh air. He had a friend waiting for him in the car so he called to him through the window, then splashed some cologne over his mother to bring her to.

Her breathing was laboured as she muttered "Thank God you've come. Thank God you're here. I ask God for nothing except to have you standing at my side when I die."

His friend Mohammad came upstairs and he asked him to buy ammonia water and coramine quickly. When his friend had left, he tried to revive his mother; her voice rattled her breathing was harsh. His friend, Mohammad, brought the ammonia water and coramine with which her son revived her. Slowly her breathing became steady. She had come back to life because she saw her son.

All those images went through her mind while she was sitting on the rug praying God to restore her only son's health so he could take care of his little family and his two children.





WAVES OF LOVE

When she received a phone call from Alexandria telling her that her husband, in spite of his critical condition, was coming on the Pullman bus arriving at Cairo at five o'clock at the Heliopolis bus station, she could not stay at home.

It was four o'clock on Friday afternoon. The streets were empty because people were sitting at home or at the football stadium watching the important game between the two leading teams in the tournament. She sent her young son in his sick father's car to wait for him at the station while she stood in front of the towering building fighting back her morbid thoughts to the tune of her unsteady heartbeats.

It was cloudy. A strong wind was blowing, sweep-

ing past the few pedestrians in the long empty street, trying to sweep away some of her worries and restore her peace of mind. What would become of her if anything happened to her young husband, with whom she had spent the past twenty years with all their ups and downs ?

A stream of sweet memories with him coursed willy-nilly through her mind, making her tears flow again. Was this how life was supposed to end, leaving her in charge of her son and daughter, also worried about their father, waiting for him there at the garage while she stood here at a loss, not knowing what to do, with time passing so slowly the clock seemed to be going backwards ? She was overwhelmed with guilt when she remembered her past few days hith him, when she had scolded him for sleeping too much when he came back from work. She used to shout at him, "you seem to have a heart attack the minute you set foot in the house. No talking ! No conversation ! You don't even care about the problems I have with your children. You don't have a minute to spare to go over the children's homework with them. I am the slave God bestowed upon you and your children. From morning to night I work in the house, cooking the food, cleaning the house, serving dinner, then washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen while you all go to sleep. Why can't I sleep like you ? Why ? Why ? "

She hadn't realized that he had been suffering, finding comfort in sleep unaware that his liver was diseased.

He too had been struggling in spite of continuous exhaustion.

She had not known that her heart was so bound up in his. Her preoccupation with the everyday business of life its monotonous humdrum routine repeating itself day in day out, had temporarily eclipsed her fealings of love for him and for son and daughter.

The petty problems of every day had driven that undercurrent of feeling almost out of sight, where it might have remained had it not been for the illness that had attached her dynamo-like husband, bringing him screeching to a halt and shaking the very foundations of her existence.

She looked at her watch and found it that was half past five and he had not yet come. Again morbid thoughts made their way into her mind and she vowed to flood her husband with all the waves of love bottled up inside her to sweep aside all the trivial problems of living. But where was he now ? He had not yet arrived. Had anything happened on the way ? Did the expected bleeding start ? Had his critical condition worsened ?

Staring at the end of the empty street, she saw her husband's car driven by her son, coming back from the station.

Her heart beat faster and she almost fainted with terror. She was unable to speak. Her son answered her unspoken question. "The bus won't be coming to the

garage for at least an hour because it is going to take the passengers from Alexandria to the airport."

She almost had a heart attack. She never noticed the Pullman bus stopping in front of the building. Then the door opened and her son and daughter cried out, "Daddy, daddy !" She too ran to embrace him. Slowly he alighted, his face pale and yellow. The bus drove off and the street was empty except for the wife holding her husband in her arms while he leant on his son and daughter. They walked slowly towards the house.

A FLAME OF LOVE

The newspaper slid out of her hand in her shock. She could hardly believe her eyes. Once again, sitting at her desk at work she picked up the newspaper. Carefully she reread, "The well-known writer has survived his heart attack and is now out of intensive care. His doctors have ordered him to remain in bed for at least sixty days because he is suffering from fatigue and overwork."

Memories flowed instead of her unshed tears. She held her head in her hands and sank into the sea of her memories with him, years ago when her every breath was drawn with him, her heart beat only in time with his, her eyes rested only on the songs of his heart which she read in his novels, which expressed her own feelings and emotions. One day he was caught in the grip of a sickness that only the will of God could cure. At that

time, by chance, she happened to be in the house of the God of love, surrounded by millions of pilgrims looking up to Him with their hearts and souls, and she found herself muttering prayers for the health of her loved one, forgetting to pray for herself.

Time passed ; life's misfortunes separated them and the flame of love in her heart waned and dimmed, until she imagined it to be completely out, and she lived without love until she read those words printed in the newspaper. Like a spark born on a hot desert storm, it kindled the fire of love hidden deep and undetected in her heart, when she had believed that everything had turned to ashes all the while.

Her heart beat again. What should she do now ? She raised her head, dried her tears and looked among her papers and in the telephone directory for the number of the hospital ? Should she really ring him up now after such a long time ?

Her heart beat wildly and the struggle between her heart and mind started once more. Her hands shook as she dialled and the line went dead. Why not go to him ? No; she would hate to see him sick in bed, pale with his ever-present smile missing and the love gone from his face. "Why am I upset now ? Has the feeling returned to my heart now or am I just doing me duty ?" The questions whirled in her mind as her shaky fingers, dialled, egged on by her heart.

At last the answer came and the switch board put her

through to his room. His voice came from afar, weak as though from another planet, as though echoing up from the depth of his heart.

— "Please don't talk a lot."

— "You ! ...' '

— "I wanted to make sure you're all right."

— "Thank you."

— "I shall pray for you."

— "Thank you."

— "I am at your service. If you need anything at all ..."

— Silence.

— "Are you all right now ?"

— "Yes, thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. And you ?"

— "You're all that matters."

The line was disconnected.

IT'S BEEN AN HONOUR TO CARRY YOUR BAG

— "Thank God you're all right."

— "I haven't seen you for four months !"

— "Has it been that long ? I really can't tell."
"Port-said isn't that far from Cairo ! I've been lying in bed like this for two months."

— "Thank God all is well. I shall tell you, my dear, what I've been through : you be the judge."

"For a start, I'm so pleased to see you. How are you now : especially your eyes ?"

— "Oh, my eyes ! Listen : after the cataract operation I left for Port-Said with my wife. My daughter Maha came to be with us before she went to America. One day, just for fun, she wiped my face with one of those

wet, perfumed paper napkins you find in a eroplanes. Immediately everything went black ! I ran and washed my face, and a little while later my sight slowly came back."

— "Heaven preserve us !"

— "Since then I've avoided perfume like the plague, so my eyes won't be affected again."

— "Overwork, professor : you must take it easy."

— "My dear, overwork when I'm only sixty ! You know I listen to music all day long and record tapes for my friends. It's my hobby !"

— "Anyway, get to the point and go on !"

— "Just wait ! Your mother my darling wife, slipped on the stairs; then we both had a lovely honeymoon, young people of sixty ! She couldn't move because her leg was in plaster, while every now and then I had trouble with my eyes."

— "I find you not guilty : I deduct two months out of the four."

— "There is also the month for the eye operation."

— "That makes three months out of four."

"Thanks be to God."

— "Innocent without a doubt ! Thank God I saw you

and my mother at all ! But you've been in Cairo for two whole days ..."

— "Oh, I was coming yesterday, but do you know what hoppened to me on the Port-Said Pullman ?"

— "What ?"

— "Your mother had come to Cairo before me in order to see my son Mounir who had come here on a very short leave from abroad. I rang her up and she told me that he had arrived, so very quickly I packed my black overnight bag and got on the next bus for Cairo. When we'd reached the outskirts of Cairo I heard a woman sitting near the driver asking him to stop at the Alf Maskan station which is, as you know, the first stop in Cairo, but the driver shouted to all the passengers, "I shall only stop at Al Tagneed station, Roxy and Tahrir" The passenger kept coaxing the driver. He refused, but finally he succumbed to Eve's weapons and stopped at Alf Maskan station, which suited me just fine. I got up, took my little black bag from the shelf and alighted. I arrived at the house and saw my wife and son. I felt a bit tired, so I got the bag to take my medicine from it. But the minute I saw it I got a shock !"

— "Why, what happened ?"

— "The bag was not mine !"

— "And ... ?"

— "My imagination ran away with me. What could be in the bag ? Ali Baba's treasure ? What ?"

— "Was there any money in your bag ?"

— "Nothing except my medicine and a few papers."

— "What did you do then ?"

— "It was ten o'clock at night and that was what upset me. How could I go back to Tahrir Square ? Where was the bus depot ? Finally, I opened the bag."

— "What did you find ?"

"I laughed ! So did my son and your mother. There was nothing in it even remotely like the things I'd imagined ; no Ali Baba treasure, nothing but two imported chocolate bars, a pair of pyjamas and a folder which I opened. It was a case, a lawsuit."

"Then the owner of the bag was a lawyer."

"He was, but where was his address ? I searched and searched, but I found nothing but a small piece of paper with the address of the office where the case had been engraved, but no telephone number. My son and I searched again and finally we found a card with the lawyer's name and his home number."

— "You rang him up ?"

— "It was an old number before the numbers downtown were changed."

— "What did you do ?"

"I found a telephone number written in pencil at the back of the card, so I called but no one answered."

— "He must have been looking for his bag as well. Did you have a card in it ?"

— "No, nothing to show my address."

— "You should have put a paper or a card in the bag."

— "I will from now on."

— "What did you do ?"

"I kept at it until midnight when at last I heard a voice and asked if Mr. So-and-so was in. He answered, Yes, I am.

— "It's been an honor to carry your bag !"

— "So it's you ! Hello ! Hello ! Pleased to meet you !"

"We laughed and introduced ourselves."

OM ALY AND THE CUP

"Praised be the Prophet !" said Om Aly holding the coffee-cup in her hand while I lay sick on the bed.

— "A thousand blessings upon God's Prophet !" I gave the traditional answer.

— "I have glad tidings, my dear. You will get a nice letter, bearing no bad news. This is a happy year and, God willing, you will get well soon and be on your feet again. All your wishes will be granted. Praise the Prophet !"

My friend Hussein who had come to visit me muttered, "Praised be the Prophet !"

— "How pure, my son, your heart and conscience are. They are lily-white. You love everybody."

— "Of course I do. I even want people to be better than I am."

— "God's will be done ! You must light three candles for Al Sayeda Nafeesa."

— "Three more on my behalf."

Looking into the empty coffee cup, translating the psychic waves emanating from it, Om Aly said, "I see a word on paper ; don't let it annoy you. There is someone whose name begins with A ..."

— "And ?"

— "He is a true friend."

— "That he is."

"Your intentions are good. You do not approve of devious ways. You are appreciated at work. Your work will take you on a journey to a new place."

— "Allah be praised ! Oh pious believers ! Oh, Prophet of God ! It is your blessing and that of Al Sayeda Nafeesa."

"You will see a vision which will come true. Before you go to sleep on Sunday and Thursday nights praise the Prophet and recite twenty times this passage from the Koran "Say there is but one God" and say "For the sake of the angels of this passage fill my way with light' and your wish will be granted."

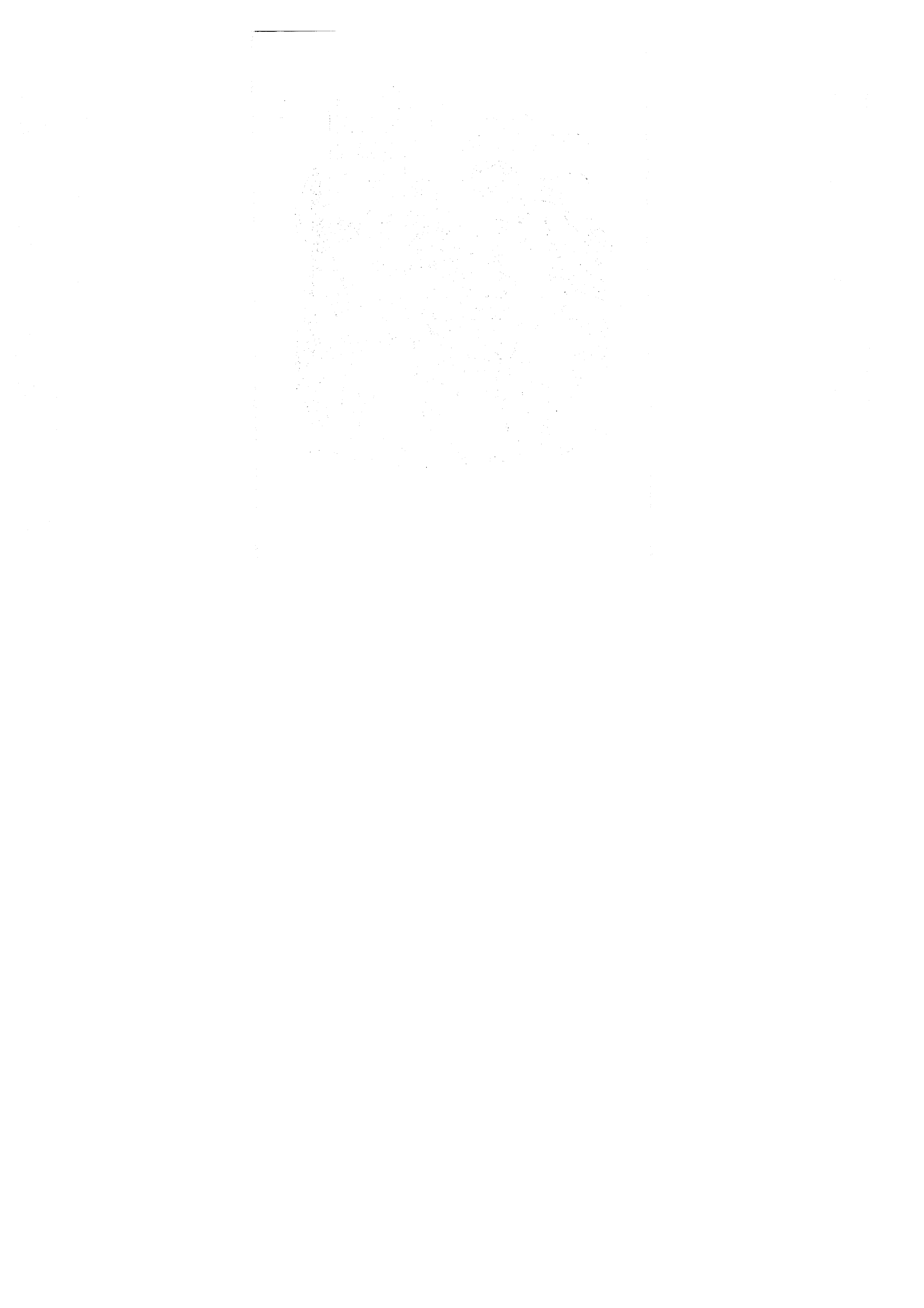
— Thank God !"

— "Your cup is radiant."

— "God be praised ! May he always let me hear your good words, sweet one."

I felt a strange peace descend upon me because of what Hagga Om Aly had said, despite the rational, logical way I usually go about life. What is it, then, that makes me feel so relieved and contented when Hagga Om Aly reads the cup while I lie sick in bed ?





A WILL

This is a short message I must address to my son Hassan. I would like to say a few words to you so that you may know hom much love for you there is in my heart and in your mother's heart, the mother who bore you for nine months lying flat on her back on doctor's orders. When you came into this world on February 5th we counted the days and almost burst with joy on your arrival : your mother, grandmother and myself. You became the world's most famous newborn, heir to the throne, the Boy Wonder ! Happiness overwhelmed me when you ran and jumped and I chased you around the dining table. When I bought you a bicycle, it was as if I had bought a Cadillac. Now, when I watch you drive off in the early morning taking Omneya to school, I feel content because you have become a man. You must shoulder your responsibility and be at your mother's

service for she has no one on earth except you and naughty little Amany.

When you were ill — especially that time you fell down and could not get up again, — I would be mad with worry and make the round of all the specialists with you. Nothing like that had happened to me when I was a child. I wanted you to grow up quickly so that you could be my companion with every step I took. I used to sit at my desk with you in front of me, holding a pencil in your tiny hand, scribbling on paper or pecking away at the typewriter. Your mother was in seventh heaven, especially on your birthday when all our loved ones were gathered around us.

Then came your sister Omneya with her sweet dimple and my world became even brighter. I worked hard for both of you, for you were the two most precious gems in my life.

Why am I telling you all this ? Because you are going to shoulder my responsibilities. For every person in this world God assigns a journey and every journey has an end. I have travelled a lot during my short journey ; I have seen many people and many countries : from London to Tokyo, Rome to Greece.

If sometimes you find me treating you harshly, time will teach you why I did : because in this world you will find no compassion. People are not angels as you may think. Never believe that they will be like your

father or even your mother who was sometimes harsh, screaming at you.

When my journey in life comes to an end, and your mother's too, you will not find genuine affection in this world because most people tend to be treacherous and mean, and their own ends are foremost in their minds.

I shall tell you how I lived with these people so that you may benefit by my experience. Try to be popular ; to do that you must like everybody and be helpful to everyone. Don't expect anything in return from them, only from God. He alone will reward you, with good health and good children. Don't let petty things blind you to what is really important in life.

The charge I leave you burdened with until the end of your journey is your sister Omneya. Even when she is married and has grown-up sons she will have but one brother who must be her shield, her tower of strength and her support in the rough waters of life. Life is treacherous. It toys with people, and charms and occupies them to the exclusion of all else. You might even forget your mother ; but you should make a point of caring for your mother, for the prophet has said "If you obey your mother, Paradise is yours."

You can see how I treat my own mother, your grandmother. But for her I would have been a wander on the face of the earth. For she brought me up and lived only for me after she was separated from my father when I was but a year old. To this minute she has not remar-

ried. The poor dear suffers my pain, feeling with me the sickness that has kept me bedridden for three months. I should have cared for her even better, but my struggle with the fierce sea of life made me pour all my energies into facing life's challenges, mustering all the strength and persistence I was born with, that I inhaled with the first cry I uttered when I joined this game.

I had to pay dearly so that you, your sister, my mother and yours might consider me a good father. Days slipped stealthily out of my life without my achieving what I hoped for in my work and my writing. I never finished *Journeys of Love or The Merryland Saga* which depicts how God meant man to love others, not kill and hate them. What remains at the end of all the fighting and loathing is too well known : ashes, ashes.

A beautiful deed lives forever. Speak kindly to people . When you love them, they will love you in return. Do not forget, though, that you will also meet people like dogs. Why, I wonder, do we insult someone by calling him a dog ? Dogs are well known for their loyalty and faithfulness. When you give a dog a bone, he appreciates it. Anyway, people are all different : it would be too much to expect everyone to be perfect.

What is the value of these words which I am recording ? I like to consider them candles to light your way through the darkness of the road of life. You are still young. Life has not drained you as I was drained in its whirlpool. The advice I give you is to excel at any job

you like. Even if you sell beans, do it so well that you become the king of bean-sellers, the greatest bean man in the world.

The more you work, the more you pay. It's like making a deposit in the bank of life so that when misfortune comes your way you can withdraw what you need from your account and not be in need of others.

Look at me for example : I have fallen, from being a white horse soaring limitlessly through the skies, into a yellow ditch. I feel sorry for myself. What is this damned bile and this hepatitis ? It is shameful. Even the illness itself is ignominious ! All the same, I always thank God and pray, "I do not ask you to change what you have ordained, only to lighten the blow."

If during the journey of life a man who is well liked by everyone falls ill, he will find the words of those people a better cure than medicine. The ringing of the telephone and the voices of people asking how you are is the most beautiful symphony in the world. The roses sent by them are hearts beating with love because all through your life you have given them love. If you fall, you will reap what you have sowed.

You will know the value of every word I am saying to you when you grow up and join a bigger game, get married and have children. Then you may sigh and say, where are you now, my father ? Oh, for the happy days we spent with you ! How good you were to me.

If I have deprived you of some things it was only

to harden you to such deprivation as I have suffered. The world is not going to give you anything without hard work and persistence. Had my father given me all I wanted, I would have been shocked by life when I eventually had to assume responsibility, because life will not give me anything I ask for unless I fight for it tooth and nail.

My darling son, only when you grow up and marry will you realize how deep is the love that I feel for you and Amany.

Do not be cruel to the 'friends' whom you find treacherous or mean because this is the nature of things ; the rule, not the exception. You must accept the rules of this game you play along with millions of people.

The last piece of advice I leave you is to hold onto the principles you believe to be right and good. Do not forsake them, even if you lose everything. The worst loss you can ever suffer is the loss of your self-respect. Always hold your head high by adhering steadfastly to your principles however much it costs you. In the end others will respect you the more for it, and admire the love that God has placed in you. Love is the most precious blessing that God can bestow upon a human being. Guard it till the end.

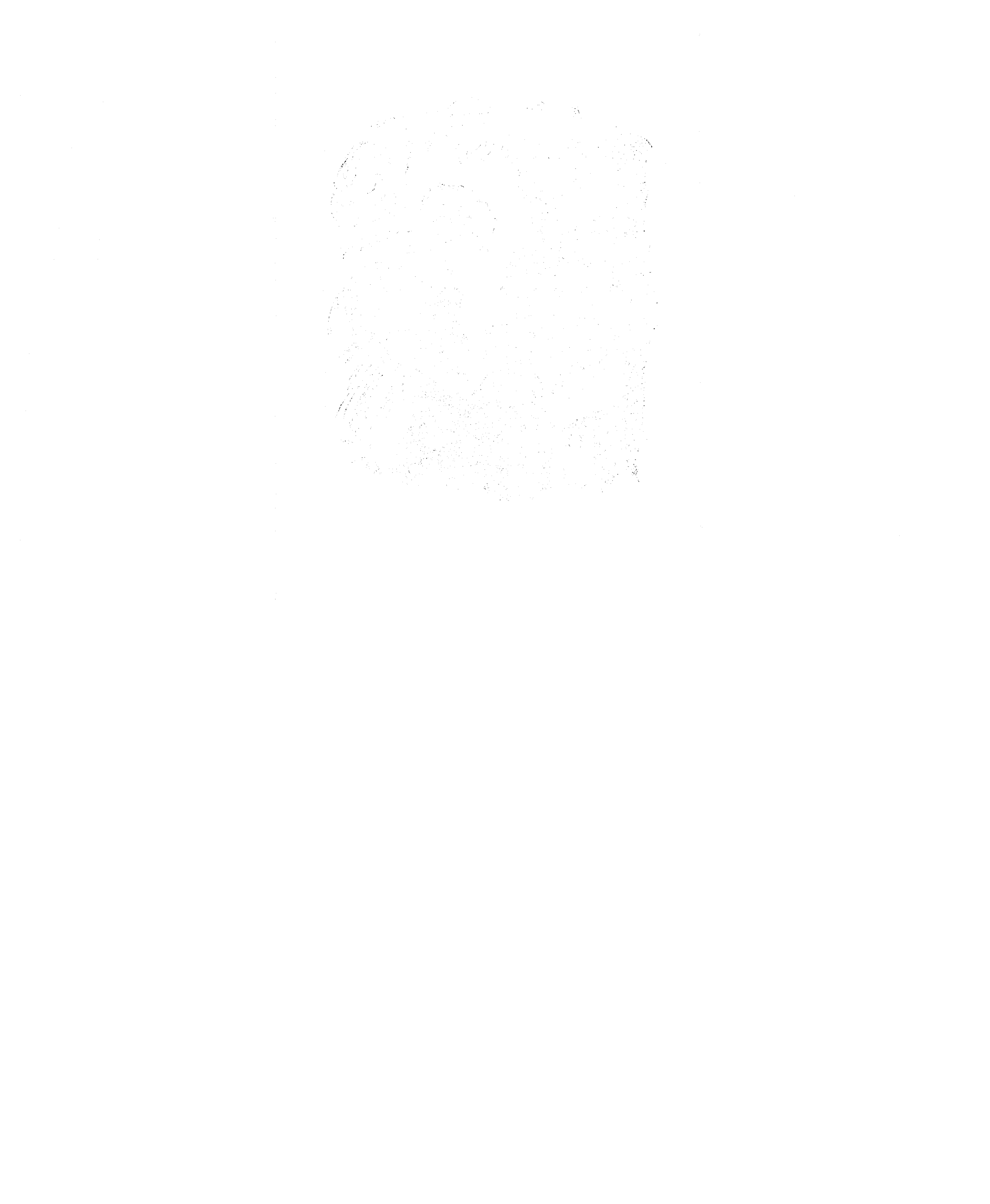
If my journey comes to an end, it is only God's will. Everybody must die, sooner or later. My only hope was to be able give you more, to see you much better than me. I wanted God to add some more days to my journey so

that I might finish what I have wanted to do for twenty years, but was unable to because I was busy raising you and creating a decent life for you.

Try to remember me if you find yourself in any trouble ; draw from my store of persistence a little strength with which to cope with the things that you, your sister and those around you will all have to confront.

I feel tired but also at peace, because I have left you those words. I have sowed in your heart the seed of love which, I pray to God, will grow as you grow and become a boat which will sail you safely across the sea of Life.





THE REVOLVER DOWN MY THROAT

Lying sick in bed, what I see from my position outside the game is quite exciting. For sixty days now I have been lying in bed, but what helps me to fight the sickness are the stories and events that daily take place in the game. They make my blood boil !

Skimming through the newspaper my attention was caught by a story rather like the tales one hears of the Chicago mobs or the Italian Mafia, only on a small scale, funny, sad and exciting too ; the story of the rape of a housewife What happened ?

The people in the district of Shoubra a particularly crowded area, swarming with million of ants gathered around a man pulling a woman by the arm, slapping her and pushing her toward his car while she shrieked and screamed calling upon those ants to save her. But they

just stood there. as though watching a street show. It was an exciting scene, so much so that it drove some of the ants to ask the man what was happening. He said that she was his relative eloping from Upper Egypt. He warned them against interfering, pulled out his gun, pushed the woman into the car and drove off.

When did this farce happen ? The story naively states that it happened in broad daylight, sometime in the afternoon. The courageous knight drove her to Al Haram Street and, threatening her with the gun, he forced her to spend the evening with him in a nightclub to quiet her nerves. Finally he dragged her out. On seeing a policeman she shouted to him to save her from this beast, but the courageous knight explained that she was a mental case who had escaped from a sanatorium with the conviction that all her family wanted to kill her. He said that her condition deteriorated when she did not take her medication and that she had not taken any medicine since the morning. The woman clung to the policeman's clothes but the courageous knight shoved her into the car and drove her to his apartment, far away near the Pyramids.

In the apartment, still at gunpoint, she did not scream but took off her clothes piece by piece and was raped, again afraid for her life.

The newspaper crumpled in my hand and my brain cells stopped thinking about what had happened. I tried to rest my eyes so as not to feel sick, but some of the words that I had read almost made my head explode.

what else happened ? What the woman's husband returned from his trip she told him how she was raped. She was crying and the tears froze the husband's nerves, numbering them like the most effective of anesthetics.

"He tore me apart with the mouth of the revolver at my throat. He knows everything about me. When he knew you had come back, he threatened me by telephone that if I did not give in to him again he would expose me to you. He kept some of my things after he raped me."

What did the husband do ? Did he suffer a heart attack when he knew the awful truth, that his castle had been torn down by a villain ? Did he shoot down his abused wife ? Did he divorce her ? He did none of these. He called the police. They arrested the criminal, confronted him with the policeman for whose help the woman had asked and the bum broke down and confessed. But is the husband's heart content seeing his ravaged wife every day ?

I am still lying outside the game, resting, spared from what goes on inside it.

A BARE PEARL

The clock has just struck three in the afternoon and Amany is not yet back from school. She should have been home half an hour ago. Her mother, pacing back and forth, is wondering, "Why is she late ? She's never late. Why hasn't she come back as usual with her classmate, the neighbour's daughter ? Where is she ?"

Lying in bed I listened to what her mother was saying, but I reassured myself that Amany would manage to come back from school on foot in spite of the rainy weather. May be she had stood out of the rain for a while. It hurt me to be a prisoner in bed for two long months. I used to take her to school and back in the car. The pleasure she showed when she ran out of school into th car made me hold onto life so that her sweet smile would stay on her face. When I took her to school she

always waited for me to kiss the one dimple on her left cheek. These images flitted through my mind and my heart began to worry. Another half hour passed and she still hadn't come.

The mother shouted to her son to take the neighbours' car and go to school to look for Amany. He went out at once. Ugly conjectures and horrible thoughts gnawed at me. Had she been kidnapped ? It would be a calamity. How can I find her when I am fettered to my bed ? How will she be found after we notify the police and the district attorney ? Her picture will be published in the newspapers and shown on television.

I shall jump out of bed even if it means my death. I shall not wait for the criminal to be sentenced in court. I shall kill him. I certainly will and it will be the first and last time that any criminal ever dares to kidnap a little girl.

How dear my small daughter Amany is to me, with her sweet smile that greets me when I come home weary from the daily game we play every day as though prodded by a hidden magnetic power to go on spinning.

The tremor in my heart increased. I felt my ulcer burning and my liver inflaming. A terrible dizziness attacked me. Then the doorbell rang and in came Amany followed by her brother. Her mother would have beaten her ferociously, but I wouldn't let her. The girl had stood there waiting for the neighbours' car. They hadn't

come, and she had remained standing there, all alone, while the rain poured.

I ran to Amany who fell into my arms. I kissed her dimple and all my morbid fears vanished. I felt I owned a pretty rare gem.



SUPER MAMA AND THE MILLIONAIRESS

What is this ? This can't be a woman that the TV cameras are photographing ! They say that satellites are transmitting what is happening to TV sets all over the world ! This is indeed a spectacle worthy of being seen by everyone on earth : a group of doctors are in an operating room doing a caesarean on an Italian woman. They open up her tummy; they produce a baby, then another, then another like magicians. A third baby appears, which is not extraordinary, then a fourth ; All the while, the television cameras were recording this memorable moments for millions of eyes staring at their television sets.

The fifth baby was being taken out of the Italian woman's abdomen as the camera was already zooming in on the doctor's fingers immersed in a pool of blood hold-

ing the feet of the sixth ! Other hands grabbed it while all the onlookers stood flabbergasted at this historical event in human history. My heart almost stopped in sheer amazement at the sight of the eighth baby crying and punching the air with his hands.

Eight babies in the womb of one woman ! She must be a rabbit ! But it is a fact not fiction: it is broadcast on television and released by news agencies and published in the newspapers and magazines of the world.

These pictures go through the mind of the millionairess as she walks into the examining room of the world-famous, expensive gynaecologist. The examination she is about to have is her last hope. She inherited millions from her Greek father, the billionaire. She controls the lives of thousands of people who work in her huge fleet of oil tankers and in her factories. All the women in the world envy her millions. She does whatever she wants, flies to anywhere in the world whenever she feels like it. She can buy any man and drown in oceans of bliss. She has been married twice, searching for the spark that might light up her heart with the flame of true love, but she has never found it.

Every step she takes is covered by the international news media. She is a prisoner of camera lights, of reporter's words, of all the news items published about her in the newspapers of the world.

They do not record her tears, alone in bed, praying God to grant her wish of becoming a normal woman,

suffering the pains of pregnancy and childbirth like any ordinary rabbit. She does not go so far as to pray to be like that rabbit who has given the world eight babies at one go. She only wants to feel the movement of an embryo inside her.

She lay flat on the examination table under the lights. Her tears flowed, and the nurse standing beside her dried her eyes, for she too was moved. The famous doctor, hands in surgical gloves, approached and started to examine her while the images of the television rabbit who had bestowed eight babies upon the world rushed in a confused jumple through her mind. She imagined that she was giving birth and uttered a loud cry. But she did not give birth and the fingers of the famous doctor were still performing the examination. The doctor finished his search for the secrets of God's creation, took off his gloves, washed his hands and left the examining room.

Outside, the photographers' cameras were waiting to take pictures of the beautiful millionairess leaving the famous doctor's clinic, despair written all over her features so that she looked like an old woman battered by the years, while the doctor's words rang to her ears like a death-sentence.

"I am sorry. There is nothing we can do. It is God's will. You are barren !"



FLYING WITHOUT WINGS

I am lying in bed and everyone around me is asleep. My eyes are lost in the darkness of the room, floating in unknown faraway spirals as though I were flying over the universe. I can see myself lying there on the couch surrounded by the books I have collected from all over the world. It looks like a coffin with me lying there in a shroud, making no movement or sound.

I am a bird in a transparent world and all around me are bright transparent featureless beings with no definite shape, no specific form, white translucent beings flying here and there without once clashing, or colliding, or fighting over trivialities.

I am a bird, floating without wings in an endless vast place among God's transparent creations, floating with me in the vastness.

Without TV cameras or electronic equipment, without wide-angle lenses or space cameras, I saw, by the grace of God, the tiny toy ball in which we play our ridiculous games, cops and robbers. I saw myself there, lying motionless on the couch while the human creatures spun round and round inside the game, clashing, squabbling, fighting for mouthfuls of air. Each of them tramples over a fellow human being to rise even one step higher, then continues the endless round until this clay body falls, this body which imprisons the divine spark, God's secret, the hidden soul. The body falls, letting the soul fly once more into God's eternal space.

I saw the endless sagas of we human creatures, swimming in rivers of blood among shredded fragment of broken bodies, surrounded by the debris of the tools of destruction created by the minds of these mad human beings.

Without the help of my eyes I saw love being frozen, being turned into a statue, buffeted by the waves of the sea, on which people turned their backs and did nothing except quarrel, fighting and bathing themselves, in the blood of others, nurturing these bodies of ashes with mendacity, hypocrisy, and all that is evil.

A wave of feelings from my ethereal soul washed over me, flying among God's transparent creatures and rid at last of the heavy clay body which imprisoned my shinmering soul.

Swimming in air with God's spiritual beings I prais-

ed Him and thanked Him for his blessing in freeing me from the fetters of my clay body with all its torture and pain. I felt lighter and lighter, as though I was walking among God's blessings and nearing His all-encompassing throne.

Suddenly I found myself plummeting downward at a dreadful pace looking at my body flat on the couch. The transparency dissolved into harsh combrous reality and I started to fidget in pain. I heard the call for the dawn prayer, opened my eyes to darkness and muttered some verses of the Coran praying God to deliver me from evil to have mercy upon me, forgive my sins and make me one of his faithful servants, always thankful for His blessings. I was still crouching in the world of the game

PHOTO OF A BELLY-DANCER

Round and round it goes, everyone still running, panting, to get ahead of everyone and push everyone else out of the way. I'm still here, hanging on the edge, not quite fallen into non-existence nor moving on the merry-go round. The telephone rang. The voice of a friend asking how I was made me feel that I was still a part of the game. Caring for others and asking after them is a rare commodity these days. The voice told me that the newspapers had mentioned my name, giving my condition. I must have been quite important in the game while I spun with it. I picked up the newspaper and scrutinized it with my yellow gaze but could not find the item about me. Just before closing the paper, though I, glimpsed my name in just three short lines. How many thousand words I have written ! But that is the way of the game ; when you fall, you are trampled over by thousands of running pairs of feet.

In the center of the page there was a very large picture of a well-known belly-dancer. She had fallen ill due to exhaustion in performing her sacred vocation. She had been rewarded by the government, who sent her to Germany for treatment, after she had been crushed by hundreds of other bodies, to regain her beauty and participate once more in the merry-go-round. The words also stated that the run-down dancer would go to Switzerland after Germany to rejoin her husband and recuperate. As for me, I wore my brain out for years, weaving intricate patterns of words, but when I fell and had to lie on my back outside the game I could not even cry in pain, "Oh, my liver !"

MR. BISSO

Time is a cripple and pain is still boring into my liver with no treatment except to lie back and while away the time as best I can, My cat tries to make the time pass, hoping to entertain me by jumping around beside me like a clown, but to no avail. When she saw that her efforts were ineffectual she slipped quietly into the sofa beside me and lay serenely on my chest, staring at me with wide-open eyes as I stroked her silky fur. It takes all my strength to contemplate the roses before me, with their beautiful shapes and colors. They are as much an expression of my friends' sweet emotions as they are God's artistic touches.

Neither the telephone nor the doorbell rings. My wife is in the kitchen preparing a few boiled potatoes and a tiny piece of chicken for me. I am hungry, but

I cannot eat, for whenever I do, my liver swells, bigger and bigger and the pain becomes fiercer. I must take a lot of drugs to help me digest even this small morsel of potatoes, since my liver has stopped functioning in order to repair itself. It is the biggest chemical laboratory in the human body.

The doorbell rings. In comes my friend who has taken the trouble to come all the way from Alexandria to see me

Trying to raise my spirits, he fills me in on all the latest news of the game. He apologizes for not coming sooner, smiling :

— "I had a bit of bad luck."

— "Nothing serious, I hope."

— "It is, rather ; however, God's will be done."

— "You have always been a pious man, Yehia."

— "I try to thank God always, whatever happens. It's like this : as you know, I went to an Arab country to work and came back with a few thousand pounds with which I hoped to get financial security for myself and my family. I heard of Mr. Bisso."

— "Mr. Bisso ? Who's he ?"

— "Don't you know him ?"

— "No"

— "He's become the most famous businessman in Alexandria since he was paralyzed by a stroke."

— "Heaven preserve us !"

— "Hardly surprising : I almost had a stroke myself !"

— "God's will be done. But what happened ?"

— "Oh, it was all honest and above board my friend : Mr. Bisso is a good man. His working capital amounts to three million pounds and everyone gives him their money to invest for them : he gives them a good profit. I myself gave him my four thousand pounds."

— "Why didn't you put it in a bank ?"

— "It was the will of God. A year later he gave me back the sum plus a thousand pounds, but I gave it back to him to reinvest, plus the two thousand that my wife got from selling her jewellery. I believed it was heaven-sent good fortune."

— "Then what ?"

— "Dozens of people have been investing in Mr. Bisso's trading ventures for years. He is a good man, with a flawless reputation. But circumstances ..."

— "What circumstances, Yehia ?"

— "Mr. Bisso bought copybooks, pencils and other items of stationery for a quarter of a million pounds, intending to sell them at extremely low prices. Can you imagine, he would have sold pencils for one piaster each, his pro-

fit being only six millimes. Copy books, too, he would have sold for two piasters, making a profit of one piaster per copybook. Most of the other articles would have been the same, but the government spoilt it all."

— "What happened ?"

— "They issued a regulation forbidding the private sector to deal with certain countries, such as Korea and China. Only the public sector had the right to do that. Otherwise, they said, it would be a threat to the local market. Thus his deal was declared illegal by the tax authorities and his entire stock confiscated."

— "But why didn't he speak to someone in charge ?"

— "He didn't waste a moment. He used all the influence he had. He spoke to all his friends in high places, including a few councillors and judges, but it was no use."

— "What is to be done then ?"

— "Master Bisso is paralyzed."

— "God's will be done !"

— "And your life savings ?"

— "In God's hands. I am grateful. I was not paralyzed nor were my wife and children. Thank God."

"Life is indeed a game !"

"The important thing is your health, my friend."

"Praise be to God. Surely He will not let your patience go unrewarded."

— "A thousand thanks. I have made my pilgrimage to Mecca so has my wife.

I have a car and I am still in good health, my friend. That is God's blessing."

"Nothing matters in this game but our kindness to each other, God's approval and His forgiveness."

"God be praised. Life is nothing a futile game."

— "Then why must people fight over it like animals ?"

— "God only knows."

"I believe in His wisdom."

— "I never knew you'd been bedridden for sixty whole days.

— "Thank you again for coming to visit, my dear, and tolerating the impossible traffic. Thank you so much. Tell me all your news."

— "Oh, life goes on but sometimes everybody seems to be fighting me."

My wife interrupted to offer her a glass of pineapple juice. "All successful people have lots of enemies."

— "I tried to ring you up, but there was no answer."

— "The phone was out of order. I felt so cut off ! It was as though I was living on a desert island. More than once I asked my friends for help until at last it was repaired. The telephone is my only means of com-

munication with the game these days. How is everything at the newspaper ?"

— "The editor-in-chief is against me because I have an article in every issue."

— "What about your stories ?"

— "I'm not writing stories nowadays."

— "And how long are you going to be a nun, devoted to literature and the pen ? Why don't you get married ?"

— "It is too late. I have devoted my life to my pen, and to love !"

— "Love ? What love is that ?"

— "I try to love everybody, but I get nothing but coldness."

— "Yes ; especially from other women."

— "Why is that ?"

— "Jealousy."

— "Jealousy of what ?"

— "Whenever I meet a colleague — in fact, any woman — she seems to suspect that, being single, I'll either have an affair with her husband or steal him away."

— "It certainly takes all kinds ! And this happens as soon as you meet ?"

"You don't understand women."

— "Does anybody ?" I smiled.

— "A woman laughs and jokes about the subject, but if she loves her husband she is always jealous, believing that every woman is out to snatch him from her."

— "You just said you were living for love. If you're so keen on being friendly with everyone and being single gives you trouble, why don't you change your mind and get married ?"

— "I told you : It's too late I spend all my time working, reading, writing, translating, story writing and asking after my friends. But I have a good name to protect. If you were not a close friend, I certainly would not have dared to come to your house to give you these editorials."

— "Thank you. I won't forget your help."

"Don't say that ! You are like a brother to me. You should take better care of yourself. You fell ill outside Alexandria because you work too hard. Everybody admires and envies you."

— "Envies me ? What for ? Why on earth should anyone envy me ?"

— "That's life, my friend. You write in all the magazines, you appear on radio and television, you have had many books published.

— Don't you expect to be envied "

— "But I work day and night and deprive myself of many pleasures and social gatherings."

— "They only see the facade. Your name is everywhere, therefore you are successful."

— "They can't see me now, lying flat on my back for two months."

— "They wouldn't care."

— "You are right. Those inside the game care for nothing.

— They trample all over everyone. Would you like a cup of coffee ? Then we can read our fortunes in the cup."

— "Do you believe in that ?"

— "Of course not, it's just for fun. Flights of fancy."

Coffee was brought. My friend and my wife talked for a while as we drank the coffee, then my wife excused herself as she had to go and buy some medicine for me. My little daughter sat by my side playing with the cat. I addressed my friend.

— "Now you've finished the coffee, what does the writing on the cup say ?"

— "I shall make a joke of it."

— "As you please but I know you are good at cup reading."

— "God forbid !"

— "What does it say ?"

— "I already told you that you are envied by others.

You will always walk along the road of success, but alas !"

— "But what ?"

— "Beware of the opposite sex. They swarm around you like flies."

— "At work, I seem to see nothing but the opposite sex. what's wrong with that ?"

— "You are sensitive and courteous ; that is what puts you at risk."

— "Who cares."

"You will get a great reward."

— "Hoorah ! A trip to Mars ?"

— "You are making fun of me."

— "Fun, my dear all fun : flights of fancy."

— "This is important : beware of envy, the Evil Eye."

— "God protect me from the Evil Eye ?"

— "That's all the cup says."

— "Thank you."

FIGURES IN THE DARK

Everybody at home is asleep. I gaze into the dark, watching images of my past flitting by. I sense the presence of ghosts around me : featurless, eyeless, bodiless. The reel of years rolls by and I am almost hypnotized by these faraway scenes from the deepest recesses of my memory. Who is that woman with the white veil, whispering to me in the terrible silence ?

"Don't you know me ?"

"I can't remember."

"Years ago, when we were young."

"I can't remember. It's all confused in my mind."

"Don't you recall the bombs ? In the war ?"

"Which war ? I have witnessed many."

"The war which destroyed Alexandria."

"Oh !"

"Are you beginning to remember ?"

"I'm trying."

"When people fell dead like locusts, when the raids never let up, when the rockets demolished houses and killed and shattered people. People ran about praying aloud and children ran through the streets screaming."

"We were children."

"Yes. I remember it very well. Everybody was crying in fear while you lay in my lap, caressing me."

"Oh !"

"Yes caressing me as we played bride and groom, and the sound of bombs and guns and the droning of bombers were like the trilling cries of joy in a wedding. You and I could not feel the death and destruction that surrounded us on all sides, you and I the bride and groom with my fingers deep in your hair."

"Oh ! It was you !"

"Yes We escaped death and all the others died."

"Where are you now ?"

"It is enough that you remembered. I am sorry but I must to go back now, to my body far away."

She melted into the darkness, but she was still stand-

ing in the corner of the room. It seemed to me that I whispered.

"Why have you gone to the far corner of the room ?"

"Can you see me ?"

"You're not her."

"Who ?"

"She was here just moments ago."

"Is there someone else ? It is I, who have given you the prime of my life and the nectar of my love."

"Then who are you ?"

"How can you forget me when I am in your blood ?"

"What blood ? My blood has dried up !"

"Don't say that !"

"Can this really be happening ?"

"Anything is possible in the world of the spirit. Our souls float, free as air, while our bodies remain where they are fettered and bound to the clay of reality."

"Wait !Can it be ... you ?"

"I knew you would recognize me. I am unlike anyone else."

"Do you know ... her ?"

"Here, we know everything. Nothing is concealed. Everything is clear."

"Good God !'

"My moments with you are the life I was destined to live in the world of clay, in darkness we grasped what we were never to know in the light."

"But ..."

"I know what you are going to say. We should have lived together in flesh in the world of clay."

"That's impossible."

"But our ancient Egyptian ancestors achieved that impossibility in the world of clay."

"But we were two souls in one clay body."

"Yet we held the unknown in the darkness. When our offspring cried out in the light, your body melted away and your image was lost to me, But I imprinted it on the face of our offspring so that it would return before me. Your soul was lost in your clay body and in the bodies of others but now, chained in the fetters of torture you are mine, mine alone."

"What are you doing ?"

"I shall extract your soul from your body and take it back with me. It is mine."

We both heard a muffled cry in the darkness of the room. "No, no, leave him alone. He's mine."

I waited for the one who would seize me in the dark

but could only hear the one who had uttered the muffled cry.

"Who are you ?"

"Don't you know me ?" You have stolen my life away."

"How ?"

"When you taught me letters and words and rules ...,"
"I can't remember."

"How can you not remember ? The flame of your passion consumed my virginity."

"What do you mean ?"

"Don't you recall your kisses mixed with the salt of the sea when we were together, swimming and swimming to reach the island of salvation ?"

"Oh ! Go it is you !"

"You remember now ?"

"yes, but I never."

"Yes, you never touched my clay body. I know. But you broke into my virgin soul and in those quick, fleeting moments you stole it away."

"I looked for you. I mean I asked after you."

"And they told you I had gone to this eternal world."

"Yes ; that was a long time ago."

"Don't you want to know the truth ?"

"What truth ?"

"I killed my body so as to wed my soul to yours."

"But ..."

"But you buried my soul in this rotting body of clay."

"How did you reach me ?"

"It doesn't matter. I have come to take you with me."

"Where to ?"

"To where we can bathe together in the sea."

"How can that be, when I can't even move out of bed !"

"In this ethereal world, we have no use for your rotting clay bodies. Our sea is boundless, calm and without harsh waves. Let us melt together into eternity. Come on."

The whispering in the darkness was pierced by another voice.

"Impossible. He is my twin soul."

"What ? Who are you ?"

"Don't you know me after all these years ?"

"How can I, when I can't see you !"

"That's because you are still blind. You are not yet free of your clay body."

"I ..."

"Don't say a word. Stop. The years have taken

you away from me, after I had given you the secrets of my heart and you had become my entire existence. In the heat, one summer, the sweat seeping out of our bodies melted my soul away and it found another clay body with your name so that my heart would not break. I have spent my life writhing and burning in the name of your namesake. And at last I have found you."

"Are you in eternity too ?"

"I have not reached it yet."

"How did you come, then ?"

"On a wave of my incessant torture, that transcends our clay bodies."

"But ..."

"You want to know why I came to you."

"Maybe a call of the spirit ?"

"No. I knew you were bound in the chains of your illness."

"Is this just a visit ?"

"Maybe ; and then again, maybe I've come to achieve

what I couldn't get when I lived with you in the world of clay."

"What are you doing ?"

"Don't be afraid."

"I am not afraid."

"I can feel that your spirit is uneasy. Why is your spirit upset ?"

"Have I become a ghost ?"

"No. Not until you are out of your clay shell."

"Where are you going ?"

"I am sorry. My body is calling me back. It is enough that I have had this glimpse of you."

Her spirit vanished into the deep darkness. I heard another voice, a soft whisper, heard it with my sense of non-existence.

"Are you better now ?"

"Who are you ?"

"So you have forgotten me."

"Have I seen you before ?"

"You are not used to seeing me like this, without my face of clay."

'I can't ..."

"You heard my voice today."

"How's that ?"

"When I asked about your health, this morning on the telephone."

"Lots of people asked about my health."

"But I am not like the others. I am the proud one, the

beautiful one, whose, smile was enough to melt a man's heart. I thought I lived on the bleeding of the hearts of men who longed for a word of praise to bolster up their ego until life brought you before me and with your purity and your forgiveness of my whims you invaded the depths of my heart and sat on its throne. I became mad about you."

"Tell me ..."

"I know what your question is before you ask it."

"How strange !"

"Do not be astonished. Everything here is in the light, revealed. You ask why I have come after we'd separated because we had stood naked before one another. You destroyed my vanity and since I could not devour your heart and my ego feed on your defeat, I melted in the sea of light where your soul swam and my body was engulfed in the sea of light. When you tried to love me my body was not mine any more and we separated."

I was speechless.

"You taught me the secret of swimming in the sea of light and here I am. I came back to thank you and when you are rid of your clay body we may meet again."

In the deep darkness I saw another ghost and a third and fourth and fifth. The darkness was full of phantoms, some I knew, many others I did not. I felt

them all pulling at me, and I surrendered. But the call for the dawn prayer sounded; it pierced my ears and I felt the pain in my swollen liver. I was not sure I existed until I felt myself muttering, "Oh God !"





PUSSY

I am have been lying sick in bed for sixty days now. My liver is still aching. My eyes are now used to the silence of the books stacked on the couch in front of me and the memories evoked by the pictures hanging on the wall. The only things that break the monotony of these hours, or rather, days, when I am alone in the room, are her lively looks, her little face, her lively playfulness and her insistence on snuggling into my arms trying to kiss me and rub her small head against my face. She can never calm down until I stroke her head or fondle her and kiss her ears. Then she will calm down, put her tiny head between her little arms, close her eyes and cuddle on my chest like a baby while I stroke her light brown fur. When the doorbell rings she suddenly awakes, pricks up her ears, her amazing radar: her pupils dilate and like a rocket she flies through the

air on her way to the door, streaking between the legs of the newcomer, hoping to meet with something new in our long corridor. She too is bored with the sight of the apartment as she has already explored its every nook and cranny, all the secret places under the chairs and sofas, while chasing my little daughter, back from school, or when hiding from the mother's threats of vengeance : for she plays with the curtains, she climbs over them, and sometimes tears them when she is in a fit of excessive energy, hopping here and there like a ballet dancer, or a monkey fleeing frightened from a tiger or a savage beast. Sometimes she performs strange dances over me, playing with me and gently biting my fingers to break the depressed monotony I feel when lying motionless in bed. Other times she sticks her nose in the book or newspaper I am reading and plays with my fingers as I try to turn the pages. Thus our darling Siamese cat fills the emptiness in our house and in our hearts. Fights break out between my son and daughter over who is to fondle her first. The children's mother screams when all of a sudden the cat attacks her and bites her feet then flees like lightning to hide in her secret places under the beds and chairs away from punishment.

All these pictures came to my mind as I sat in front of the doctor at the veterinary hospital, while Pussy's shrieks tore at the silence of the room and my children's eyes were fixed on me, waiting for what I had to say. While I was sick in bed an alley cat had viciously scratched our Pussy, torn her left arm and left it bleeding.

Some time after we had bandaged her up she caught a disease the doctor called tinia.

"What are the effects of this disease ?"

"It is contagious and causes ringworm in humans."

"Is there some quick procedure or a fast-acting drug ?"

"She must stay in hospital for twenty days.

"How much will the treatment cost ?"

"One pound a day for treatment, food and board."

I looked at my children and into my daughter's eyes. She loved Pussy a lot. I thought of the expense. It would cost more than twenty pounds. An idea occurred to me. I could leave her in the hospital for good or put her out in the street. But how could I ? Leaving her in the street would mean her death. I asked the doctor, "What would you do if we left her with you ?"

"Don't leave her with us. Leave her anywhere else ! Oh and if you want us to put her to sleep, you'll have to pay two pounds."

"What for ?"

"The price of the lethal injection. She would die quickly, without suffering, and be buried in the hospital cemetery."

The newing and shrieking of the cat grew louder as the orderly gave her an injection and rubbed the place with ointment. While the doctor was busy on the phone

the cat looked beseechingly into my eyes, my daughter's and my son's.

For a few moments I was engulfed in a whirlpool of doubts and emotions. Should I pay the twenty pounds to save the cat ? The children's mother had screamed at me to throw her out because the disease was contagious. But this cat with her shrieking, newing and imploring looks, and her dumb tongue, unable to speak yet more moving than the tongue of a human being his fellow creatures with his harsh words ...

Pussy had softened my moments of depression when I lay sick in bed, playing beside me and snuggling serenely in my arms, or performing her mad dances in an attempt to make me smile or laugh and ease the discomfort that gnawed at me because of my pain and my feeling of helplessness at being sick. Should I led her down now ? Her inarticulate tongue was the most eloquent expression of her feelings.

The doctor's question demanded my attention :

"Well ? What have you decided ? Will you take the cat with you, or ... ?"

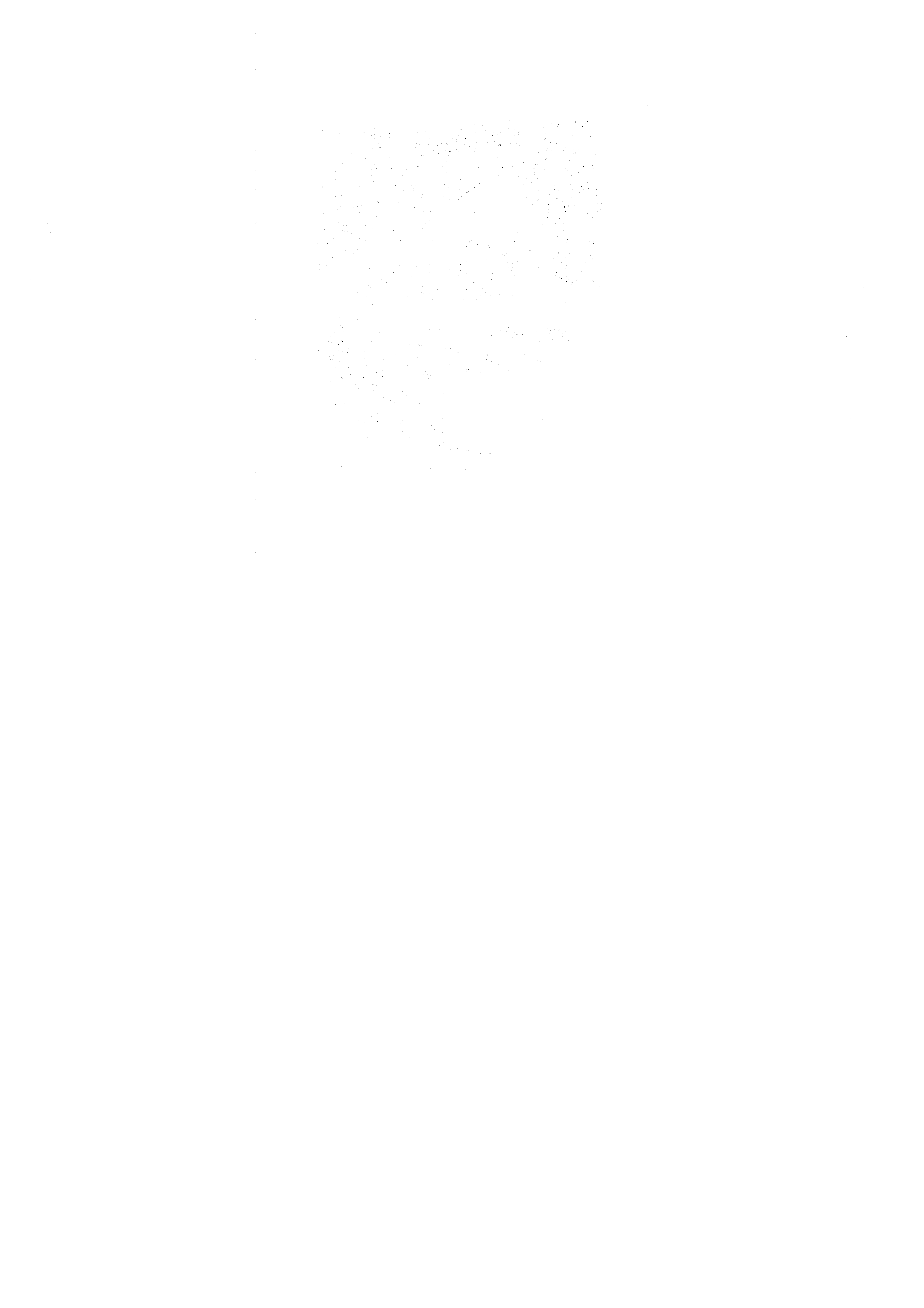
I pulled twenty pounds out of my purse and put them on the desk. At once the tender kiss of my little daughter was on my cheek and she said.

"God bless you, Daddy."

I smiled. My son looked happy too, and left that I had restored their confidence in human emotions which do

not perish in the whirlwind of material cares. I felt at the peak of happiness. Pussy stopped mewing and shrieking. I took the children and drove home in the car with all the joy in the world bursting from my heart.





THE WORDS DIED

"The car's disappeared." said me little girl on coming back from school. I was shocked but could not move for I was chained to my bed by sickness. I asked,

"Maybe the garage hand parked it inside ?"

"I asked him and he said that my brother had taken it."

My worries reduced me to the most morbid of conjectures. How dare he take the car without my permission ? He knows I am not well. What happens if he collides with something or some mad speeder crashes into him ? What if a traffic — worden stops him and asks for his licence when he does not have one ? How can I act, bedridden as I am ? If they take him to the police-station, how can I get him out ? There are so many procedures to be taken care of ! Driving without a license is an offense punishable by imprisonment. I

would have to be in very good health to be able to keep the matter out of court and clear things up.

I shall teach him a severe lesson. I shall beat him. The pain in my liver woke me up, pulling me out of my reverie. How can I beat him when I can't even move ? I felt that the years had pushed me forward into my sixties or seventies and that I had suddenly become an old man. What will my son do with me ? What will the others do ? They will just look at me pityingly.

I hope that the day will never come when people look at me with pity because I am old, for they are not accustomed to respecting the weak. Even my own son did not think of my illness, only of how to satisfy his desire to drive, believing that I would not find out. But for my daughter noticing that the car was missing I would not, have known.

He should have been at home half an hour ago. Did the car break down or what ?

The doorbell brought me out of my reverie. My son came in. Driven by anger, I tried to get out of bed and take his head off his shoulders, but I restrained myself and sat on a handy chair, looking at him with sparks of fire shooting out of my eyes. He stood before me trying to explain why he had taken the car, but I did not hear his words because the pain in my liver was increasing, the images in front of my eyes faded and the words died on my tongue and in my ears.

WORDS TO MY LITTLE ONE

I whisper these words in your ear, my little one, before I quit the game : words born out of the bleeding of my heart, smelted in the fires of what I have gone through putting everything I had into the nest I have built, little one, in this everlasting, inescapable game, where we all breed like rabbits. But beware of the most dangerous thing which can blast the game apart and turn your life into an inferno :
namely, lack of patience and a sharp tongue.

I shall tell you, little one, about the purifying fire I have passed through to protect you, for you are a part of me ; you bear my name and your blood flows in mine.

While I stood before the God of all Gods in His Sacred House, naked, barefoot in front of the holy Kaaba

having rid myself of all the impurities and sins that clung to me from this world of filth, chanting the names of the Omnipotent Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the All-Forgiving, I knelt offering Him my thanks and gratitude, asking for His pardon. Having prayed, I sat feasting my eyes on the Kaaba, and I saw a sweet little girl like you, wearing white and making the round of the Kaaba with her father. I thought of you, my little one, and hoped to see you in her place some day. My transparent soul flew to the coming days when I would see you a beautiful bride in white. I wanted to whisper a few words to you, to help you be happy in your new life building your little nest. Your heart must be full of faith; the name of Allah and the praise of His Chosen Prophet must always be on your lips. You must read the koran often, for it will keep your tongue from slipping. You must heed the teachings of your beloved chosen Prophet, obey your husband and love whomever he loves, family, acquaintances and relatives. Don't you ever slander, or gossip about, others or the awful torture of Almighty God will be in wait for you. The fires of hell will burn your tongue for what you said about others. Try, little one, when you become a beautiful young lady, to deal with the good side of people and ignore their bad deeds and mistakes. The Almighty will punish them for their faults. It is not for us to pass judgement on others. If you do, you will be shunned and hated by others even if you are in the right. Everyone hates to be blamed and criticized every step of the way. You should, if you can, give your advice with no ulterior motive and deal with

the good side of people. Every person has his ugly side and his bright one. Try to see the good side always. Do this with your husband too, if you want your life to be happy and serene. Do not step outside the great realm God has bestowed upon you and remember that men are responsible for women. The man is the leader in the home. He is responsible for you, your home and your children. You too are responsible for your husband, your home and children. Each of you has his own job, its limits laid out by the Prophet by example in his life with his family. God's Prophet sets the best example.

My little one, in this pure place, when I see you in my heart's eye as a beautiful bride, emotions crowd one another in my heart. I may not actually see you ; for who knows what the future holds, or whether I shall be beside you in that beautiful moment. It may be that I shall die, as everyone must, since death is our lot: everything perishes in the end, and only the face of the Almighty is everlasting. Try to learn from other people's mistakes, our lives, the lives of those closest to you.

Do not repeat the same mistakes. Be generous and forgiving, even to those who harm you. They may then be ashamed of themselves and try to endear themselves to you. But if you find yourself passing judgement on people, ask yourself who you think you are. You are not an avenging angel, and everyone has his faults and foibles. Be forgiving, even from a position of strength, and this will not be easy unless you are patient and have implicit faith in God and his chosen Prophet.

My little one, standing in this pure spot, I can hear you say "How can that be, father, when we live in a jungle where the evil crush anyone who has a clean conscience, a good character, a chaste tongue, one who guards his honor and his principles ? How can that happen in this jungle where a brother only acknowledges his brother for what he can get from him ?

Anyway, my little one, try to hold onto your values and morals and the outcome will be honorable for you, your husband and your chidlren.

Let your conversation with others be in gentle tones, not in screams. The Prophet, God's chosen one, the first teacher of mankind urged us to talk in a low voice as it rests both the ears and the soul.

I hear you, my little one. "What if my husband strays or becomes bad-tempered and impossible to live with ?"

I shall tell you, my dear. When you have adhered to God's religious teachings and treated your husband in the manner dictated by Heaven, ask yourself first what you have done to bring about such a change. Have you been giving all your attention to your children ? Did you neglect your looks ? A man wants his wife to be always pretty and clean, he wants to hear from her all that is good. After his daily, exhausting journey, struggling with life, do not burden him with trivial problems and insignificant things which jar on his nerves. Try

to make your life as serene as you can : you will be happy, and those around you too.

I tell you these words, my little one now when I feel I am outside the game played by all mankind. I tell you the essence of what I have been through, hoping that these words will illuminate the road you take in life and spare your nerves the whirlpool of fierce and futile struggles.

And last, my little one, never forget, during your happy life, your loving father. Read the Koran for him and remember my sweet moments with you when you were tiny and I rocked you and soared with you. Remember your mother who bore you, brought you up and nourished you for you are a part of her. Remember all that was beautiful around you, that your game of life may be more beautiful.

SHORT STORIES BY THE AUTHOR

— Without End

SHORT SHORT STORIES

— The Heart of LOVE

— Love Song

— A kind word

— A Brief Hunting Trip

— O My Country

NOVEL

— A Journey Outside the Game

— A Rabbit, Like Everybody Else

— Secret Love Trips

— Journey 46

— The Cockerel.

— Maryland.

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